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Paley, William Samuel

The American system of broadcasting

[Chicago?]

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The American System of Broadcasting

by WILLIAM S. PALEY

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An address by William S. Paley, President of The Columbia Broadcasting System, delivered before The Second National Conference on Educational Broadcasting, Chicago, Illinois, November 29th, 1937

I AM particularly glad to have an opportunity to talk about the American system of broadcasting before this special group. As educators among a free people, you are familiar with the older tools of democracy and I know that you are keenly aware that a new one has been fashioned and that the manner of its use is of vital import to America.

We broadcasters, as custodians of a great means of mass communication, are eager to have you know what a driving force in our democracy it has become. We are eager to have you know because we believe that if once you know you will see that he who attacks the fundamentals of the American system attacks democracy itself.

So my thesis today is that broadcasting functions democratically in harmony with the American pattern and, so functioning, has itself become an essential part of that democracy.

Broadcasting may be divided, somewhat arbitrarily, it is true, into three broad categories. The first is public affairs. The second, for want of more exact language, I shall call culture and education. The third is entertainment. In all three I shall trace the pattern that I have just defined.

If I were talking about broadcasting in the countries of the dictators I should have a simple story to tell. In those countries broadcasting has been owned by the state and used by the state to

mold the people to its will, with the people compelled to listen to what their rulers wanted them to hear and barred from hearing anything else.

In America it has been different. We were pioneers and there was no authoritarian hand to mark out a path for us.

In the beginning we stumbled and groped. We saw only dimly the possibilities of mass communication, the complex and often conflicting avenues that were open to us. We were new in a world that was changing and changing fast. Economic necessity was driving the man in the street, the man in the factory and the man on the farm to take a deeper and a more active interest in the public affairs and the politics of his country.

As more and more millions abroad were forced to lay their liberties on the altars of dictators, Americans, slowly realizing that democracy anywhere might be threatened and even lost, found themselves newly and intimately and deeply concerned with the drama of Europe and the chief actors in it.

While all this was happening, the evidence was accumulating that broadcasting could move the actions of men. People would listen, they would understand, and they would act. Living participation in the events of the world and of the nation—events great and small—had arrived. Frontiers melted like mirages; cold type turned into the warm voices of real men; ideas, good and bad, traveled farther and faster.

Naturally once so powerful a thing as broadcasting had proven itself, all sorts of people and all sorts of interests wanted to use it for all sorts of purposes. Manifold evidences of this desire forced us to think, to decide and to act. Particularly in the realm of public affairs did we need, as we grew in experience, to develop a code of ethics. We were under a very compelling necessity to do our best. Public confidence and goodwill was the only thing we could rely on to perpetuate the system in which we believed. Seldom if ever has private enterprise had stronger motives for trying to serve the public interest. I come now to some of our major conclusions, the practices which flow out of them, and the reasons for them. Most fundamental in my own mind is this: Broadcasting as an instrument of American democracy must forever be wholly, honestly and militantly non-partisan. This is true not only in politics but in the whole realm of arguable social ideas.

To put it another way, we must never have an editorial page, we must never seek to maintain views of our own, on any public question except broadcasting itself. Moreover, we must never try to further either side of any debatable question, regardless of our own private and personal sympathies. Of course I do not mean that any broadcaster as an individual may not on occasion express his own views like any other citizen. I state this principle of non-

partisanship first and I state it as emphatically as I can because I believe this is the cornerstone of democratic broadcasting.

You will perceive at once a striking difference between our position and that of the press. Let me point out the reason for that difference and at the same time try to clear up some of the confusion that has existed as to the meaning of such terms as "freedom of the air", "freedom of the press", "censorship", "editorial judgment" and the like.

I realize that having dwelt in the beginning on the power that lies in broadcasting I must offer logical evidence to back my conclusion that we ourselves must not use that power in the realm of controversial ideas, political or otherwise. Now, freedom of the press as I understand it, means the right of the publisher or the editor to express any view he happens to hold on any public question and even to refuse to publish the utterances of those who seek to controvert his views. He may even use his whole publication for the sole purpose of furthering his own ideas.

Why may the press be as editorially partisan as it pleases, while we may not? For the reason that there can be an unlimited number of publications devoted to countless purposes whereas the number of broadcasters is rigidly limited for physical reasons and therefore an editorial attitude on the part of broadcasters would always carry with it the danger of one side of a vital argument being maintained preponderantly or even exclusively. If an editor's views are stodgy, or unpopular, or if he rides hobbies that bore most people, he pays the penalty of dwindling circulation, but he has violated no public obligation.

If you accept my definition of freedom of the press, let me next define freedom of the air as I and nearly all other broadcasters understand it. Freedom of the air means the right of a speaker to express any views he may hold on any question of general interest. He must be guarded, and he is guarded in that right, regardless of how the operators of network or station may themselves feel about the thing he discusses. If he is not libelous or otherwise unlawful, if he is not obscene, if he does not seek to provoke racial or religious hatred he may say whatever he pleases over the air. I admit that ordinary questions of good taste or good manners sometimes arise, but virtually always they can be satisfactorily settled by consultation with the prospective speaker.

Right here I want to admit, too, that isolated instances of violation of this canon can be found. Most of them lie in what is for radio the distant past. Occasionally one is due to sudden emergency and lack of time for proper consideration; now and then someone, somewhere blunders.

I have given you a definition of freedom of the air. I have tried to show why it is not the same thing as freedom of the press.

The next great principle in keeping American broadcasting forever keyed to the needs of our democracy is "Fairness of the air". By that I mean that no discussion must ever be one-sided so long as there can be found anyone to take the other side. The party in power must never dominate the air. No majority must ever monopolize. Minorities must always have fair opportunities to express their views. Again because the number of broadcasters is limited by physical necessity and since, in the case of networks, millions listen at one time, it is imperative that all sides be fairly treated. Moreover, the dramatic velocity with which ideas reach the nation through this new medium, the compelling attention gained by those who, in this modern way, contend in person in the public arena of thought and opinion, the degree to which our people have come to rely on the radio for first-hand contact with men and events, all thunder this same democratic moral of freedom and fairness. For us wilfully or by the force of others, to do differently would be an unforgivable betrayal of the people themselves.

This discussion of fairness leads me naturally to the next cardinal principle evolved out of experience. Let me describe another and a costly policy maintained by Columbia and, I believe, by virtually all broadcasters as a further safeguard to the fair and democratic use of our medium. We sell time to sponsors solely for the advertising of their goods and services. We do not sell time for propaganda.

By propaganda we mean any attempt to influence legislation, regulation, taxation and the like. Despite the tempting revenue we might have derived from such sales, we decided against them first of all because we believed it was part of our public obligation to provide time for the discussion of controversial issues.

An even more compelling reason was the danger that the side with the most money would win the argument and often, that special interests would drown out the voice of the public. Moreover, if we did sell time for such uses, the amount of talk on the air would be wholly dependent on the willingness and ability of proponents and opponents of issues to buy it. Obviously we could not sell time for such use to some and refuse to sell it to others and thus we should be unable to maintain anything like program balance. The sole exception we make to this policy is the sale of time to political parties during an actual election campaign. This exception is made because the parties want to use and are entitled to use more time than we could possibly afford to give away.

What I have already said will, I believe, foreshadow what I shall now say about the field of education and culture. Democracy is a pattern of living which great nations and very many millions of men have found worthwhile. It has been hard won and some-

times easily lost. It does not automatically maintain itself in 1937 any more than it did in the centuries of the past. Many men and many institutions must struggle constantly to preserve it, because unfortunately the thoughtless are apt not to know how precious a thing they are surrendering until it is already lost.

If I may venture my own definition of democracy it is this: the ability of a people, provided they shall have free access to truth, to choose by instinct and understanding, by trial and error, that way of life which, with fairness to minorities, gives to the greatest number those things which they want. When I have said "access to truth" I have defined our policy with regard to culture and education. To the limit of public acceptance the broadcaster must be willing that the listener shall be exposed to all kinds of ideas on all kinds of subjects. It is his technical job to see that they are competently and interestingly presented because otherwise a twist of the dial renders his medium sterile. But he must not have ologies or isms or cults of his own favoring; he must not have his particular system of economics or his pet brand of science and seek to foist it on the audience. Rather, with constant heed to the demands of those he seeks to satisfy, he must search for that which is familiar and tried or that which is new and vital. He must look for those who know and those who do and bring them to his microphones whether or not he likes them or their ideas or their ways, satisfied, with democratic discipline, to let the people take what they can use and reject the rest. Continually the broadcaster and all the creative agencies which help him put on the air a variety of things which both arouse and satisfy listener appetite. It is a widely varied and a voracious appetite; it is often a fickle one. Sometimes it startles with swift response, sometimes it disappoints with the sluggishness of its reaction. Let him who seeks to force upon it too strongly his own ideas of "good" beware! An inconceivably assorted mass audience can be led, but we have yet to find a way to drive it; nor do I believe that we are entitled to drive it toward our own or anyone else's particular conception of what will "uplift" it.

Just as it is vital that we shall live up to these democratic ideals in the fields of public affairs and culture and education, if we are to serve, it is essential that we shall maintain them in the field of entertainment if we are to survive. I believe I do not even need to argue the right of the audience to be entertained. Entertainment, and particularly the free entertainment to which nearly every man, woman and child in America has access through his radio set, is a fine thing in and of itself. I shall not dwell on the degree to which much of it is a vehicle for education, for enlightenment, for deepening perceptions and rising appreciations. He who sits before the loudspeaker, within easy reach of switch or dial, is king. He

likes some of everything and he is very vocal about what he wants. It is our job to find the best for him and to keep on bettering that best.

A few moments ago I mentioned program balance and this reminds me that I wanted to explain what I meant by editorial judgment. So long as there is broadcasting someone is going to have to decide what should be broadcast and what should not. These decisions are always going to be made by fallible human beings. Just as newspapers have editors who decide what to print and what not to print (there is never room to print it all) so do we have staffs to decide what is worth broadcasting and what is not. We engage people of background and skill, and experience, and we drill them in the principles I have been reciting. In special fields we do not try to exercise unaided judgment. Instead, we avail ourselves of competent advice. For example we have both a child psychologist and a committee of qualified advisors to insure that all our children's programs conform to very high standards.

We have a council of qualified clerics and laymen to allot fairly and sensibly the time we set aside for religious broadcasting, and our School of the Air has a professional faculty.

Though I have narrowed my field of discussion to those phases which I thought would be of especial moment to you as educators, I would be sketching too inaccurate a picture of American broadcasting if I did not dwell for a moment on the stimulus of competition. Frankly, I think we have come a long way in a short time. Had we not rivaled each other, spurred each other, dared each other, we would not have done so well so quickly. We sit hourly before the whole people as our judges. None of us can let himself be outdone in the public service.

And so in a very concentrated way, I have given you my observations about the form and the substance of broadcasting in this democracy. In the field of politics and public questions it has worked to develop public opinion that is better informed, more tolerant, and more rational. In a period which has registered the most radical social and economic changes in history, our people are understanding with greater clarity the complex problems and forces with which we are faced.

The general cultural level of our people has risen, but far more significant is the increasing aspiration toward better things. The great variety of daily broadcasts have all done their part to spread knowledge of the way men live, work, fight, play, and think in a mobile world. Broadcasting's contribution to the pleasure and happiness, as well as to the social and intellectual equipment of millions of people, is no less real because it has come to be taken for granted.

But of greatest importance is the fact that radio broadcasting

has developed and used a democratic philosophy.

I have talked much today of democracy. It is a thing precious to us all. In broadcasting it has not been achieved without a struggle. The fight is not over and it never will be. There will be danger from those who seek to lay rude and selfish hands on the medium. There will be even greater danger from those who are sincere and well-intentioned but know not the meaning or the value of the word I have used so often.

As solemnly and as sincerely as I know how, I repeat that our present American system of broadcasting, founded on freedom and fairness of the air, must be preserved and strengthened. Allow censorship to be imposed upon it, deliver it into the hands of autocrats, make it a tool of any party in power, destroy it, and you will have begun to destroy liberty in America.

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